OJA
OFFICE OF JUSTICE ASSISTANCE

State of Wisconsin

**JIM DOYLE**
**Governor**

**DAVID STEINGRABER**
**Executive Director**

1 S Pinckney Street
Suite 615
Madison WI 53703

Phone: (608) 266-3323
Fax: (608) 266-6676
http://oja.wi.gov

August 18, 2010

Sen. Kathleen Vinehout
Legislative Audit Committee Co-Chair
Room 104 South, State Capitol
Madison, WI 53707

Rep. Peter Barca
Legislative Audit Committee Co-Chair
Room 107 North, State Capitol
Madison, WI 53708

Dear Sen. Vinehout and Rep. Barca:

Thank you for your continued interest in Wisconsin emergency management. OJA respectfully submits to the committee an update on the construction of the statewide communications system and efforts to specify any costs to local goverments to use and maintain the system.

**Construction of the Wisconsin Interoperable System for communications (WISCOM): 70% of the sites will be activated by July 1, 2011.**

The Wisconsin Interoperable System for Communications (WISCOM) is a shared statewide system that will allow responders across the state to seamlessly communicate during a major disaster. WISCOM system creates a new interoperable communications capability in Wisconsin. It is designed to operate with existing radio systems, and is flexible and open enough to work with the many different local and regional systems currently operating in the state. WISCOM can also be expanded to accommodate more channels, and local agencies may find it cost-effective to discontinue maintaining their local systems and use WISCOM for all of their daily radio traffic.

WISCOM's radio coverage will be provided by installing equipment on 80 existing state-owned radio tower sites located throughout Wisconsin. In October 2009, OJA awarded a $16.5 million grant to the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (DOT) to manage the construction of WISCOM. In December 2009, DOT awarded a contract to EF Johnson Technologies, Inc. to build, test, and ship the system components to Wisconsin. Installation will be completed by DOT engineers and local contractors, saving the state hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Equipment was installed on the first site in March 2010 and a second site in July 2010. Equipment is scheduled to be installed on four more sites by the end of August. These six sites will enable system testing. Concurrently, engineers at DOT are completing preparation work on the antennas at all 80 sites.

In July 2010, WISCOM's design was modified slightly to take advantage of a next-generation router that has recently come on the market. The new router has more capacity than older models and is better positioned to handle future addition of more channel capacity and increased numbers of users in the future. The decision to use the most current technology required changing the construction schedule so that the new router could be incorporated into the equipment being built by EF Johnson at the factory. Under the revised schedule, hardware for 50 additional sites is expected to ship in November 2010 after

factory testing is complete. The hardware for the remaining 24 sites will be shipped over the winter. Installation and testing of the sites will continue throughout the spring and summer of 2011.

OJA expects that 70% of the sites will be activated by July 1, 2011. Project technicians will then begin to bring users on to WISCOM. Because OJA anticipates a high demand to subscribe to the system, considerable staff resources will be needed for connecting agencies, preparing agency equipment, training agencies on using new equipment, and establishing agency protocols. Concurrently, staff will continue to upgrade and activate the remaining 30% of WISCOM sites. When WISCOM is fully implemented, it will provide mobile radio coverage for over 95% of the state.

**Sustainment Costs: preliminary projections anticipated by October 15th, 2010.**

OJA has contracted with Kimball Associates to provide estimated maintenance, operational and warranty costs. Their preliminary projections will be available by October 15.

A single, shared statewide system provides a unique opportunity to reduce overall costs to taxpayers, eliminate unnecessary redundancies, leverage existing capacity, and dramatically improve interoperable communication across the state. Significant cost-savings have already been achieved in WISCOM's initial build-out stage by leveraging existing state-owned antenna towers and other infrastructure, and making use of longer range VHF frequencies, which need fewer tower sites. As a result, WISCOM's construction has been achieved at less than one-tenth of the cost of neighboring statewide systems.

The Statewide System Management Group (SSMG)—a subcommittee of the Interoperability Council (IC) charged with the review and approval of technical and operational decisions related to the WISCOM—has developed a WISCOM sustainment plan, approved by the IC, that outlines system goals and needs through 2013. The 23 member SSMG includes representatives from federal, tribal, state, county and local law enforcement, fire, EMS and state and local emergency management agencies.

Under the SSMG's sustainment plan, access to WISCOM for mutual aid communications during large incidents will be provided to emergency responders at **no cost**. In order to accomplish this, OJA requires a stable state funding source to cover basic operations and maintenance. OJA is currently developing a proposal for the 2011-13 biennial state budget that will include a request for state funding that would provide statewide mutual aide for all public safety jurisdictions at **no cost** to local public safety agencies.

Many emergency response agencies may also find it cost-effective to use WISCOM for all of their daily radio communications, rather than maintaining their own independent communication system infrastructure. Local communities are currently spending millions of dollars on systems that do not connect or allow communication across systems. In 2013, federal changes will make many local systems obsolete. Non-compliant existing equipment will no longer be functional; capital infrastructure replacement will be necessary for many local communications systems. For agencies faced with replacing infrastructure, the initial savings of being able to connect to WISCOM for daily use are significant.

The additional coverage and capacity needed to accommodate public safety agencies using WISCOM for daily use will be made only be possible through user fees or cost-sharing agreements. As the pool of daily users increases, cost-sharing will reduce overall operations and maintenance costs for everyone. In order to ensure these cost-sharing agreements are made in the best interests of users they

will be approved by the SSMG. The SSMG provides oversight of WISCOM operational and policy decision-making and is a valuable check to ensure that the WISCOM project proceeds with sufficient local user input and meets the needs of the public safety community.

Since 2008 an engineering firm, Kimball and Associates, has been under contract by OJA to provide technical consultation on WISCOM. OJA has tasked Kimball to project maintenance, operational, and warranty costs for WISCOM to operate at a mission critical level of performance over a ten year period. In addition, Kimball is researching comparable cost-sharing methods from other states, and will recommend a number of alternatives for the state. Both of these deliverables will be completed within six months, with preliminary results available by October 15, 2010.

Kimball is also under contract to conduct up to eight local WISCOM implementation studies. These studies will be provided in the form of no-cost technical assistance to county and local governments on a voluntary, competitive basis. Two of these studies have already been approved. The studies will research the necessary upgrades and conduct cost-benefit analyses for local communities to use WISCOM for daily radio traffic. Local communities are currently spending millions of dollars maintaining hundreds of independent systems that are not interoperable. Many of these aging systems will not be compliant with new federal regulations. WISCOM is expected to be an attractive and cost-effective option for these communities as they how to replace their systems.

In 2007, the legislature directed OJA to oversee the development and operation of a statewide interoperable communications system. By 2011, OJA will have accomplished this using less than $20 million in federal funds. At the same time, OJA has invested nearly $21 million in federal funds over the past six years to help local agencies purchase over 16,000 new radios that will be compatible with WISCOM. OJA has committed an additional $3 million more to provide radio software upgrades and $5 million to assist communities with infrastructure upgrades over the next three years. OJA will continue to make similar investments as future federal funding becomes available.

With the exception of an in-kind match, required by a federal grant, that used state funds already budgeted for DOT communication system operations, no significant amount of state funds has been used to construct WISCOM. Wisconsin is the only state in the Great Lakes region that does not support their statewide communication system with state revenue. Federal Homeland Security funding has made construction of this needed system possible. However, federal funding is decreasing every year. Relying on federal funds for ongoing operation and maintenance costs is not financially sound and would significantly limit the funding available for local assistance. A stable source of state funding to cover basic maintenance and operating costs is critical for statewide interoperability.

We look forward to discussing this further with you at your meeting on September 7.

Sincerely,

David Steingraber
Executive Director